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MEDON, THE CASE OF THE BODILY BLEMISHED KING *

JAN BREMMER

1. (Problem) — When we look at the historiography of classical Greek religion in Western Europe from the point of view of Thomas Kuhn's¹ paradigm theory, two periods stand out clearly. Until about 1900 the field was dominated by the 'nature' paradigm of Max Müller². After 1900 until the middle of the sixties³ the sternly positivistic approach of Nilsson dominated, an approach of which the main hermeneutical tool was (and in some cases still is) the concept of fertility, a legacy of Mannhardt and popularised by Frazer

However, this latter period also knew its outsiders, some of

* In order not to overburden the notes I have given references only to the literature which has appeared since C.J. Bleeker (ed.), *La regalità sacra*, Leiden 1959, because that volume gives an excellent survey of the question at that time.

¹ Cp. Th. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 1962¹, Chicago 1970²; idem, *The Essential Tension*, Chicago/London 1978.

² Cp. J.H. Voigt, *Max Mueller, The Man and His Ideas*, Calcutta 1967, Nirad Chandra Chaudhuri, *Scholar Extraordinary, The Life of F.M. Müller, P.C.*, London 1974.

³ A development towards a new paradigm has, in my opinion, started with the publications of J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, Paris 1965¹, and W. Burkert, *Kekropidensage und Arrephoria*, *Hermes* 94 1966, 1-25 (= M. Detienne, ed. *Il mito*, Roma/Bari 1976², 23-49 and 232-245). Considering the great importance Kuhn attaches to textbooks, it may prove to have been of prime importance for the development towards this new paradigm that the fine new history of classical religion by Burkert, *Griechische Religion der archaischen und klassischen Epoche*, Stuttgart 1977) appeared at the beginning of this development whereas Nilsson's great *Geschichte* appeared relatively towards the end of the old paradigm.

whom, as in other cases studied by Kuhn, were influential towards the new approach we are witnessing today: the geographically marginal Louis Gernet⁴, who lived in Algeria for most of his life, and the classically marginal Karl Meuli⁵ whose main interests were folklore and ethnology. Angelo Brelich, too, can be considered as such an outsider, at least for the greater part of his life. He was strongly interested in Greek mythology, a field completely abandoned by Nilsson, and was virtually the only classical scholar at that time interested in the mythologies and rites of the 'primitive' peoples.

In the field of Greek mythology Brelich's best received contribution is probably his study of the Greek heroes⁶, in which he analysed a number of recurring patterns in the heroic lives, an approach which, at the time of publication, was still highly unusual. One of the patterns studied by Brelich was the one of monstrosity or physical deformity. The hero can be depicted as theriomorphic, as a dwarf or as being lame. However, having established the importance of this pattern Brelich did not analyse each case in detail, yet it is clear that the deformation has a different significance in various cases.

The disfigurement of Hephaistos can hardly be separated from the marginal position of the smith⁷, but the wounded foot of Philoctetes⁸ probably points to initiatory practices. The small stature of Odysseus⁹ has still to be explained but seems to be of a different nature than the stuttering of Battos¹⁰, whose defect fits in perfectly

⁴ Cp. S.C. Humphreys, *Anthropology and the Greeks*, London 1978, 76-96 and 283-288 ("The Work of Louis Gernet", 1971¹). Gernet has been a great influence on J.-P. Vernant.

⁵ On Meuli, see the biography by F. Jung *apud* K. Meuli, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Basel/Stuttgart 1975, II, 1153-1209 and the perceptive observations, in their reviews of Meuli's *Schriften*, by J. Stagl, *Anthropos* 72 1977, 309f; J.J. Voskuil, *Volkskundig Bulletin* (published in Amsterdam) 3 1977, 38-41; H.S. Versnel, *Vig. Christ.* 32, 1978, 233-238; F. Graf, *Gnomon* 51, 1979, 209-216.

⁶ A. Brelich, *Gli eroi greci*, Roma 1958.

⁷ Brelich, 354-356; M. Detienne/J.P. Vernant, *Les ruses de l'intelligence*, Paris 1978², 244-260; J. Bremmer, *Heroes, Rituals and the Trojan War*, *Studi Storico Religiosi* II/1, 1978 (5-38), 16 n. 71.

⁸ Brelich, 245; Bremmer, 10-13.

⁹ Brelich, 236; N. Horsfall, *CQ* 29 1979.

¹⁰ Brelich, 316f; O. Masson, *Le nom de Battos*, *Gl* 54 1976, 84-98.

with his being a culture hero¹¹. From these examples it emerges that Brelich's work can, and should, be carried further. It therefore seems appropriate for this memorial volume to study one of the cases Angelo Brelich mentioned but did not analyse in detail. We mean the case of Medon¹², the bodily blemished king.

2. (Medon) — When Kodros, the last king of Athens, died he appointed as successor his eldest son Medon. However, Kodros' will was contested by Medon's brother Neleus and the matter was referred to the Delphic oracle. This confirmed Kodros' decision and, in consequence, Neleus left the country. The quarrel was generally believed to have been the starting point of the Ionian colonisation¹³.

The story is related by different authors¹⁴, but only Pausanias mentions the ground on which the rule was contested: Medon was lame in one foot. Unfortunately we do not know the source of this tradition but it had probably been mentioned in one of the *Atthides*¹⁵. We know little else about Medon; he was supposed to be the first Athenian archon¹⁶ and was claimed as being the ancestor by the Medontidae¹⁷. But from the few literary and epigraphical sources we have, we cannot even infer whether they were a *genos*, a *phratry*, or both¹⁸.

With the lameness of Medon Brelich¹⁹ compares the story about Agesilaus whose contestant for the throne, Leotyichides, related the warning of the Delphic oracle to beware of a lame kingdom to Agesilaus' lameness²⁰. Like Medon, Agesilaus nevertheless succeeded

¹¹ See my observations in M.J. Vermaseren (ed.), *Studies in Hellenistic Religions*, EPRO 7, Leiden 1979, 13f.

¹² Brelich, 245.

¹³ Cp. F. Cassola, *La Ionia nel mondo miceneo*, Napoli 1957, 88-94; M.B. Sakellariou, *La migration grecque en Ionie*, Athena 1958, 49-54; M. Durrante, Νεϊλεως e Νηλεὺς, *SMEA* 3 1967, 33-46; M.L. Lazzarini, *Neleo a Samo*, *RFIC* 106 1978, 179-191.

¹⁴ Hellanikos FGH 323a F23; Paus. 7.2.1; Ael. VH. 8.5.

¹⁵ Cp. Jacoby, FGH III B (Suppl.), Vol. 2, 53.

¹⁶ Vell. Pat. 1.2; Euseb. *Chron.* 1.186.

¹⁷ Paus. 4.5.10; Hes. s.v. Medontidae; IG I² 871f; II² 1233; *Agora* I 5509, cp. J. Toepffer, *Attische Genealogie*, Berlin 1889, 225ff.

¹⁸ Jacoby, *ibidem*, 63f; J.K. Davies, *Athenian Propertied Families*, Oxford 1971, 271; D. Roussel, *Tribu et cité*, Paris 1976, 141.

¹⁹ Brelich, 245.

²⁰ Xen. *Hell.* 3.3.3; Plut. *Ages.* 3, *Lys.* 22, *M.* 399 B; Paus. 3.8.9.

in occupying the throne, but we are left with the problem as to why it was thought that lameness should make someone unfit to do so.

3. (Sacral kingship) — The answer, I suggest, to this question has to be looked for in the concept of sacral kingship²¹. Frazer²² collected many examples of primitive peoples to show that the king was deposed as soon as he became impotent or showed a bodily blemish. This attitude towards the king's physical state is evidently connected with the king's responsibility for the well-being (in particular the fertility) of the country, a responsibility for which Frazer²³, too, collected a great number of examples. Frazer, however, looked for his parallels especially among the primitive peoples and, to a large extent, neglected the Indo-European tradition. Yet, as regards these two motifs — the absence of bodily blemishes and the responsibility for the country's fertility — this tradition is richer than is usually realised. This we hope to demonstrate in our next sections.

4. (Bodily blemishes) — Passing over the Greek examples we have already discussed we will now look at the Indo-European tradition. We start in India²⁴. For ancient India we have the example of Devāpi²⁵ (Mahābhārata 5.147.15ff) who is mentioned in a speech by Dhṛarāstra when relating the agony of his great-grandfather Pratīpa about his succession. Pratīpa's eldest son Devāpi "of great splendour and the last of kings, law-abiding, veracious and obedient to his father, had a skin disease". This did not prevent his father appointing him as his successor, but when all the necessities for the

²¹ Cp. H. Nachtigall, *Das sakrale Königtum bei Naturvölkern und die Entstehung frühen Hochkulturen*, Zs. f. Ethnologie 83 1958, 34-44; A. Closs, *Die Heiligkeit des Herrschers*, Anthropos 56 1961, 469-480; E.M. Loeb, *Die Institution des sakralen Königtums*, Paideuma 10 1964, 102-114; L. Makarius, *Du roi magique au "roi divin"*, Annales ESC 25 1970, 668-698; M. Waida, *Notes on Sacred Kingship in Central Asia*, Numen 23 1976, 179-190.

²² J.G. Frazer, *The Dying God*, London 1911³, 37-42.

²³ Frazer, *The Magic Art*, London 1911³, I, 345-365.

²⁴ Cp. J.W. Spellman, *Political Theory of Ancient India. A Study of Kingship from the Earliest Times to circa A.D. 300*, Oxford 1964 (I owe this reference to Professor H. Bodewitz); J. Gonda, *Ancient Indian Kingship from the Religious Point of View*, Leiden 1966²; A. Hiltebeitel, *Nakuṣa in the Skies: A Human King of Heaven*, HR 16 1977, 329-350.

²⁵ J.W. Spellman, *The Legend of Devapi*, J. Roy. As. Soc. 1959, 95-99, Chicago 1978, 459.

Royal Consecration had been fetched "the brahmins and elders, supported by town and country folk, forbade the consecration of Devāpi [...] Thus this generous, law-wise, true-spoken prince, beloved by the subjects, was yet flawed by his skin disease. The Gods do not approve of a king who is lacking in limbs, and with this in mind the bulls of the twiceborn stopped their good king." And Dhṛarāstra went on "Likewise I myself, the eldest, was upon much thought barred from the kingdom by the sagacious Pāṇḍu for being 'lacking in limbs' " ²⁶.

For ancient Iranian kingship ²⁷ we have some references from the Sassanian period, all from Procopius. When King Cabades was looking for a successor his son Zames, of whom one of the eyes had been struck out, was prevented by law from succeeding his father, since "it is not lawful for a one-eyed man or one having any other deformity to become king over the Persians" ²⁸ (tr. Loeb). After Chosroes (532-579), Cabades' son, had succeeded his father but proved to be too modernistic for the ordinary Persian taste, Procopius again notes ²⁹ that Zames had to be passed over because of his eye. There is one more example. After Anasozabes, Chosroes' son, had started a revolt against his father but had been captured, Chosroes had his eyelids seared in order, as Procopius ³⁰ notes, to deprive him of his hope for the throne ³¹.

In ancient Ireland ³² "it was a prohibited thing that one with

²⁶ *The Mahābhārata*. Translated and edited by J.A.B. van Buitenen, Vol. 3, Chicago 1978, 459.

²⁷ Cp. R.N. Frye, *The Charisma of Kingship in Ancient Iran*, *Iranica Antiqua* 4 1964, 36-54; G. Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans*, Stuttgart 1965, passim; G. Gnoli, *Politique religieuse et conception de la royauté sous les Achéménides*, *Acta Iranica* 2 1974, 117-190; J. Gonda, *Selected Studies*, Leiden 1975, I, 432-447 ("Some riddles connected with royal titles in ancient Iran", 1969¹); G. Widengren, *Aufstieg und Niedergang II* 9.1, 1976, 220-249; R. Schmitt, *Königtum im alten Iran*, *Saeculum* 28 1977, 384-395.

²⁸ Procop. *Pers.* 1.11.

²⁹ Procop. *Pers.* 1.23.

³⁰ Procop. *Goth.* 4.10.

³¹ It is curious to note that these passages are seemingly neglected in modern literature, although the first two were noted already in the still useful study of (the in 1591 all to rashly hung) B. Brisson, *De regio Persarum principatu*, edited by J.H. Lederlin, 1590¹, Strassburg 1710, 10f.

³² Cp. D.A. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship*, Oxford 1970; F.J. Byrne, *Irish King and High-Kings*, London 1973; M. Draak, *Schimmen*

a blemish should be king at Temhair"³³. This prohibition also figures in other traditions. In a story dating from the eighth century³⁴ it is described how the mouth of Fergus, the king of the Ulaid, became disturbed by the sight of a fearful water-monster. His charioteer went up to the wise men of Ulster and "told them of the king's adventures and his present condition. He enquired of them what king they would take in his stead *since it would not be proper to have a blemished king in Emain Macha* (the capital). The decision of the wise men of Ulster was that the king should come to his home and that beforehand a clearance should be made of all the base folk so that there should be neither fool nor half-wit therein lest these should cast his blemish in the king's face; and further that he should always have his head washed while lying on his back so that he might not see his shadow in the water". So the king lived for seven years till he was taunted with his blemish; he then went to fight the water-monster and, although killing it, died from his wounds.

Another, well-known, example we find in the description of the battle of Moytura³⁵. In this battle King Nuada had his hand hewn off and was subsequently deposed, because "Nuada, after his hand had been struck off, was disqualified to be king."³⁶ Eventually, Nuada's hand was restored and in due time he again succeeded to the throne³⁷.

For Rome we have perhaps an example in the *rex nemorensis*³⁸, the tradition that inspired Frazer's *Golden Bough*³⁹. In the sanctuary

van het wester-eiland, Amsterdam 1977, 104-118 and 189-191 (= *Regalità sacra* 651-663).

³³ *Ancient Laws of Ireland: Senchus Mor* III, Dublin/London 1873, 85.

³⁴ Cp. D.A. Binchy, *The Saga of Fergus Mac Léti*, *Eriu* 16 1952, 33-48.

³⁵ Cp. W. Stokes, *The Second Battle of Moytura*, *Rev. Celt.* 12 1891, 52-130, 306-308.

³⁶ Stokes, 60f. On Nuada, see also J. Puhvel, *Acta Iranica* 17 1978, 339f.

³⁷ Stokes, 74f.

³⁸ Cp. A. Alföldi, *Diana Nemorensis*, *AJA* 64 1960, 137-144; F.-H. Pairault, *Diana Nemorensis, Déesse Hellénisée*, *MÉFR* 81 1969, 425-471; U.W. Scholz, *Studien zum altitalischen und altrömischen Marskult und Marsmythos*, Heidelberg 1970, 134-138 (whom I follow in my interpretation); G. Dumézil, *La religion romaine archaïque*, Paris 1974², 409-413; F. Graf, *Das Götterbild aus dem Taaurerland*, *Antike Welt* 10 1979.

³⁹ See the fine study by J.Z. Smith, *Map is not Territory*, Leiden 1978, 208-239 (= *HR* 12 1973, 342-371).

of Diana in Aricia there was a tree of which no branch should be broken off. Whenever a slave took asylum in the sanctuary and succeeded in breaking this prohibition he had to fight against the then *rex*. If the slave was victorious he became *rex* and the old one was removed. This tradition seemingly points in the same direction as our other parallels. The king had to be the strongest and as soon as he became weakened he was dethroned. Our sources, however, inform us only about what is evidently a very late stage of an ancient ritual and the case is far from certain.

When we now review our material, the correspondence between, on the one hand, the Indo-Iranian traditions and, on the other, the Roman (if our interpretation is correct) and Irish tradition need not be surprising. It is now sixty years that, in a celebrated article, the linguist Joseph Vendryes⁴⁰ demonstrated a close correspondence regarding the religious terminology between these outlying Indo-European peoples. This correspondence, as Vendryes saw, guaranteed their archaic character; and among the terms of which he showed the communal existence we even find the one for bodily blemish!⁴¹ It therefore seems a reasonable inference that in the Proto-Indo-European community the king had to be without a bodily blemish.

When we now return to our Greek examples it will be clear that, in my opinion, we have to connect the tradition regarding Medon's lameness with this PIE attitude towards bodily-blemished kings. In fact, Frazer⁴² had already explained the case of Agesilaus by reference to similar 'primitive' examples, yet it is also clear that the notion of a bodily-unblemished king was often more of an ideal rather than a political and religious reality. Frazer⁴³ already points to the case of the African king who, having lost a front tooth, proclaimed that if his predecessors were so foolish as to kill themselves for such a loss, he did not have the intention to follow their example. Also in the Indo-European tradition the rule was evidently not enforced automatically. Dhṛarāstra was only barred from the throne "after much thought", and the Irish king Fergus did not have to abdicate although Nuada had to. One receives the impression

⁴⁰ J. Vendryes, *Les correspondances de vocabulaire entre l'Indo-Iranien et l'Italo-Celtique*, Mém. Soc. Ling. Paris 20, 6 1918, 265-285.

⁴¹ Latin *mendum* etc., cp. Vendryes, 278f.

⁴² Frazer, *Magic Art*, 38.

⁴³ Frazer, *ibidem*.

that the whole idea of an unblemished king could be waived by a strong king.

For Greece there is an additional factor to be taken into account. After the Dark Ages the Mycenaean king, the *wanax*⁴⁴, had made place for a local functionary, the *basileus*, who used to be charged with the distribution of bronze and the requisition of gold⁴⁵. With the disappearance of the *wanax* the idea of sacral kingship will have received a severe blow, although traces did survive in Greek mythology.

5. (Fertility) — If Frazer's connection of the attitude towards bodily blemishes with the responsibility for the fertility is correct, then we should find such a responsibility also in the Indo-European tradition. This is what we will finally show. We start again in India.

In India the king was the essential factor for the well-being of his people⁴⁶. He was also, if a band king, the cause for drought and hunger. The correctness of his rule guaranteed the rainfall — as appears from the following passage from the *Mahābhārata* (1.64.16, tr. Gonda): "Indra, seeing that all the ksatriya sovereigns⁴⁷ ruled their kingdom very virtuously, poured down vivifying showers of rain at the proper time and at the proper place, and this protected all creatures".

In Persia, too, the king was especially connected with the rainfall, as Widengren⁴⁸ repeatedly observed. Especially interesting is a text about the Sassanian king Peroz (457-482) who during a drought prayed to God: "If the rain is held back for my sake, for any fault of mine, reveal it to me that I may divest myself of my dignity;

⁴⁴ Cp. M. Lejeune, *Mémoires de philologie mycénienne* III, Roma 1972, 303-334.

⁴⁵ Cp. Lejeune, *Mémoires* II, Roma 1971, 182f. Burkert, *Griechische Religion*, 94 suggests that the *basileus* was "ein Art 'Zunftmeister' der Schmiede". If this is true — but our sources are very scarce — the rise to power of the *basileus* parallels the one by the *demiourgoi*, cp. L.H. Jeffery, *Demiourgoi in the Archaic Period*, Arch. Class. 25/6 1973/4, 319-330. In both cases society seemingly took recourse to its marginals in times of great confusion.

⁴⁶ Cp. Gonda, *Ancient Indian Kingship*, 6-8.

⁴⁷ For a comparison of these sovereigns with the Homeric warriors, cp. B. Oguibenine, *Complément à l'image du guerrier indo-européen*, Journal Asiatique 266 1978, 257-290.

⁴⁸ Widengren, *Religionen*, 43f, 47f, 316.

if something else is the cause, remove it and make it known to me and to the people of the world, and give them copious rain" ⁴⁹. In the Denkart (p. 109, 4ff Madan), too, it is stressed that the just king will procure the necessary rain.

In Ireland the belief in the king as rainmaker is, understandably, not found; yet here too it is stressed that the justice of the king promotes the prosperity and fertility of king and beast ⁵⁰.

For ancient Germanic kingship ⁵¹ our sources are quite rich. Already Ammianus Marcellinus (28.5.14) noted that the Burgundian kings were deposed *si sub eo fortuna titubaverit belli vel segetum copiam negaverit terra*. The *Ynglinga saga* (c. 15) records how king Domalde was killed for a bad harvest. It was even the subject of a poem:

It has happened oft ere now,
That foeman's weapon has laid low
The crowned head, where battle plain
Was miry red with the blood-rain.
But Domalde dies by bloody arms,
Raised not by foes in war's alarms —
Raised by his Swedish Liegmen's hand,
To bring good seasons to the land ⁵².

And still in the sixteenth century it was claimed by the Swedish king Gustav Wasa that the farmers blamed him for famine ⁵³.

In Greece, too, we find the same idea. In Apollodorus' ⁵⁴ version

⁴⁹ Al-Biruni, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, edited by C.E. Sachau, London 1879, 215.

⁵⁰ Cp. Binchy, *Anglo-Saxon and Celtic Kingship*, 9f.

⁵¹ Cp. H. Wolfram, *Methodische Fragen zur Kritik am "Sakralen" Königtum*, in *Festschrift O. Höfler*, Wien 1968, II, 473-490; W.A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England*, Manchester 1970; J.M. Wallace-Hadrill, *Early Germanic Kingship in England and on the Continent*, Oxford 1971; A.V. Ström, in idem/H. Biezais, *Germanische und Baltische Religion*, Stuttgart 1975, 266-272; W. Kienast, *Germanische Treue und "Königsheil"*, HZ 227 1978, 265-324.

⁵² Cp. F. Ström, *Kung Domalde i Svitjod och "Kungalyckan"*, Saga och Sed 1967, 52-56. The translation is from Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, translated by S. Laing, 1844¹, London 1961, 18.

⁵³ N. Edén, *Konung Gustaf I:s Krönika*, Stockholm 1972, 115. It hardly comes as a surprise to find that the passage was noticed first by W. Mannhardt, Zs. f. deutsche Myth. und Sittenkunde 3 1855, 308.

⁵⁴ Apollodorus 3.5.1.

of the death of Lycurgus the king was killed after Dionysos had declared in an oracle that the barren land of the Edonians would only give fruit again if they would kill their king. And Lycurgus had resisted the coming of Dionysos — that is to say he had behaved in a way which did not please the gods. Similarly, Plutarch (*M.* 297 BC) tells us that the Ainianes, a Greek tribe in the North of Greece, killed their king by stoning when there was a great drought. The idea appears positively in the *Odyssey* (19.109-114) where it is stated that the rule of a just king has the effect that “the black earth bears wheat and barley, and the trees are heavy with fruits, the flocks bring forth young without fail, and the sea yields fish as a result of his good leadership”⁵⁵.

When we now review our material it seems reasonable to infer that in the Proto-Indo-European community the king was held responsible for the rainfall and the fertility of the land. The only difference with the ‘primitive’ parallels is that this responsibility has sometimes acquired ethical overtones.

Finally, this resemblance with the ‘primitive’ peoples is highly interesting in the light of the attempts by Dumézil and his school to reconstruct a common Indo-European ideology. In this reconstruction the king is considered to have had a close connection with the third function, the farmers, and the fertility⁵⁶. Now Dumézil has always strongly opposed the application of ‘primitive’ parallels, yet it is clear that the position of the king can hardly be separated from that of ‘primitive’ kings. This shows that for a full understanding of our Indo-European tradition we cannot restrict ourselves to study only that tradition but also have to analyse the traditions of the ‘primitive’ peoples. The best proof of how fertile the study of these traditions can be lies precisely in the scientific legacy of Angelo Brelich.

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⁵⁵ The passage has often been adduced in connection with Greek sacral kingship, see most recently M.L. West, *Hesiod: Works and Days*, Oxford 1978, 213.

⁵⁶ For these (not at all always convincing) reconstructions, see most recently D. Dubuisson, *Le roi indo-européen et la synthèse des trois fonctions*, *Annales ESC* 33 1978, 21-34.